

Sri Lanka in the Classroom

Editor's Introduction: *A Virgin Vote*, a short film by director Udan Fernando, follows a Sri Lankan citizen voting for the first time in the country's 2020 parliamentary elections after becoming stranded due to Sri Lanka's COVID-19 lockdown. In the essay and short interview that follow, Fernando discusses *A Virgin Vote* and its production, as well as the ongoing political crisis in Sri Lanka. The basic information below provides context for readers unfamiliar with Sri Lanka and the civil war that engulfed the country for over twenty-five years.

Sri Lanka: Background and Statistics

Background

The first Sinhalese arrived in Sri Lanka late in the sixth century BC, probably from northern India. Buddhism was introduced circa 250 BC, and the first kingdoms developed at the cities of Anuradhapura (from circa 200 BC to circa AD 1000) and Polonnaruwa (from about 1070 to 1200). In the fourteenth century, a south Indian dynasty established a Tamil kingdom in northern Sri Lanka. The Portuguese controlled the coastal areas of the island in the sixteenth century, followed by the Dutch in the seventeenth century. The island was ceded to the British in 1796, became a crown colony in 1802, and was formally united under British rule by 1815. As Ceylon, it became independent in 1948; its name was changed to Sri Lanka in 1972. Prevailing tensions between the Sinhalese majority and Tamil separatists erupted into war in July 1983. Fighting between the government and Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) continued for over a quarter century. Although Norway brokered peace negotiations that led to a ceasefire in 2002, the fighting slowly resumed and was again in full force by 2006. The government defeated the LTTE in May 2009.

During the postconflict years under President Mahinda Rajapaksa, the government initiated infrastructure development projects, many of which were financed by loans from China. His regime faced significant allegations of human rights violations and a shrinking democratic space for civil society. In 2015, a new coalition government headed by President Maithripala Sirisena of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe of the United National Party came to power with pledges to advance economic, governance, anticorruption, reconciliation, justice, and accountability reforms. However, implementation of these reforms has been uneven. In October 2018, President Sirisena attempted to oust Prime Minister Wickremesinghe, swearing in former President Rajapaksa as the new prime minister and issuing an order to dissolve the parliament and hold elections. This sparked a seven-week constitutional crisis that ended when the Supreme Court ruled Sirisena's actions unconstitutional, Rajapaksa resigned, and Wickremesinghe was reinstated. In November 2019, Gotabaya Rajapaksa won the presidential election and appointed his brother, Mahinda, prime minister. In 2020, the Rajapaksa's Freedom Party won a landslide victory in the parliamentary elections.

Statistics

Area: 65,610 sq km (slightly larger than West Virginia)

Population: 23,044,123 (July 2021 est., 58th largest in the world)



Ethnic Groups: Sinhalese 74.9%, Sri Lankan Tamil 11.2%, Sri Lankan Moors 9.2%, Indian Tamil 4.2%, other 0.5% (2012 est.)

Languages: Sinhala (official and national language) 87%, Tamil (official and national language) 28.5%, English 23.8% (2012 est.)

Religions: Buddhist (official) 70.2%, Hindu 12.6%, Muslim 9.7%, Roman Catholic 6.1%, other Christian 1.3%, other 0.05% (2012 est.)

Government: Presidential Republic with three branches. Executive: An elected president is head of state and government, and commander-in-chief of military. Legislative: 225-member unicameral parliamentary with 196 elected officials and twenty-nine elected by proportional representation. The president has the authority to summon, suspend, or end legislative sessions at will. Judicial: Supreme Court, a Court of Appeal, High Courts, and other subordinate courts.

Elections are held every five years for the presidency (last election in 2019) and parliament (last election in 2020) with no term limits.

Literacy: 91.9% of the total population over fifteen years old can read and write

Tertiary Education: 21.3% of population enrolled, 11% with a bachelor's degree or higher (2019 est.). In 2020, the Sri Lankan government announced plans to convert more higher educational institutions into universities and increase numbers of international students studying in the country.

Active terrorist groups: Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham (ISIS); Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). In 2019, ISIS committed the deadliest terror attack in the history of Sri Lanka with a series of coordinated suicide bombings at churches and hotels on Easter Sunday, killing 266 people and injuring at least 500.

Trafficking in persons: Sri Lanka is primarily a source and, to a much lesser extent, a destination country for men, women, and children subjected to forced labor and sex trafficking; the majority of trafficking cases involve traffickers forcing Sri Lankan workers into labor overseas; men, women, and children are subjected to forced labor in the Middle East, Asia, Europe, and the United States in construction, garment manufacturing, and domestic service; authorities have identified labor trafficking victims among Sri Lankan female migrant workers who seek employment in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Japan, and South Korea; traffickers force children, individuals with physical deformities, and those from socially vulnerable groups to beg or engage in criminal activity in Sri Lanka's largest cities.

Sources: CIA, "Sri Lanka," *The World Factbook*, <https://tinyurl.com/hdbpn3ur>; "The World Bank in Sri Lanka," *The World Bank*, <https://tinyurl.com/33yf96x8>; Ellie Bothwell, "Study in Sri Lanka?" *Inside Higher Ed*, February 27, 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/3eaufjrw>; *Vision of Humanity*, "Global Terrorism Index 2020," <https://tinyurl.com/4z4e35v8>. Map: *World Atlas* at <https://tinyurl.com/3h866n6f>.



Aravinda. Source: Screen capture from *A Virgin Vote*.

Why I Made A Virgin Vote

By Udan Fernando

It all began with a very long conversation I had with a person. He became both the subject and protagonist of what later became a short English-language film, *A Virgin Vote*, released in September 2021 in Colombo and online. The conversant was a childhood and teenage classmate in Sri Lanka. Our conversation took place in a bar/restaurant in July 2020, literally a stone's throw away from the school we attended. I had just returned from Singapore, where I was located for about three months during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. My former classmate, who lived in Singapore, visited Sri Lanka in early March 2021. The COVID-triggered travel restrictions did not allow him to return to Singapore. He was compelled to be stationed in Sri Lanka for many months. In the remainder of the essay, I'll call my classmate Aravinda, which is not his real name.

Aravinda left Sri Lanka soon after the exam we were to take after the first ten years of schooling. I didn't have much contact with him thereafter. But later, I learned that he attended a school in the UK and entered university for higher studies. The year Aravinda left Sri Lanka, 1983, marked a significant juncture in both Sri Lanka's history and migration. Thousands of Tamils (a minority ethnic community, 12.7 percent of the population, according to the 1981 census), many of whom were Hindus, left Sri Lanka as refugees or asylum-seekers to many countries abroad, following a spate of ethnic riots and pogroms in July that year.

Aravinda's circumstances for leaving were different. He was not affected, as he happened to be from the majority ethnic community, the predominantly Buddhist Sinhalese. The exodus of Tamils from Sri Lanka as refugees or asylum-seekers continued as the riots became a civil war between Tamil armed groups and the Sri Lankan Army for nearly three decades. A Sri Lankan diaspora of sorts occurred as approximately 10 percent of the Tamil population left the country and settled abroad, mainly in Europe, North America, and Australia. It is important to note, though, that this was not Sri Lanka's only relatively recent diaspora.

A few years before the exodus of the Tamils took place, Sri Lanka experienced another diaspora in 1977 following a significant policy transformation that liberalized the hitherto-closed economy. (In fact, the term "diaspora" was not used at this stage. In Sri Lankan, the usage of the term "diaspora" is different. It is largely associated with outmigration triggered by conflict and political unrest.) Coinciding with the demand for labor in

A Virgin Vote

By UDAN FERNADO

2020, 12 MINUTES, COLOR

LINK TO SHORT FILM: <https://tinyurl.com/89ydmeet>

The director of this film from before sunrise until the early evening accompanies a childhood friend, a fifty-three-year old native Sri Lankan, who has spent forty years of his life living in the UK, Switzerland, Hong Kong and Singapore. Since 1983 this anonymous highly educated economically mobile professional who left his nation by choice has visited Sri Lanka a few times but built his career in first, Hong Kong, and currently in Singapore. Home to visit his mother in the Capitol, Colombo and to attend a famous annual cricket match, the subject is detained from returning to Singapore for months because of COVID-19 travel restrictions. *A Virgin Vote*, the documentary was filmed on a particularly auspicious day for the subject because it is his first chance to ever vote in a Sri Lankan election, in this case, national parliamentary elections. During the day, much of it spent walking, the subject recounts how he spent his time during this hiatus, self-identifies as someone keenly interested in politics, identifies as a patriot and differentiates between what he considers patriots and nationalists. Despite the brevity of the documentary, important issues ranging from family, to the meaning of citizenship, especially from the perspective of the subject's self-perceived belief in liberal democracy, are discussed. The documentary should provoke meaningful student discussions on several profound questions that transcend Sri Lanka.

the Middle East, many Sri Lankans, including a disproportionately high number of Sinhalese relative to the nation's population, this trend continued in the decades that followed to the extent that domestic worker remittances became a major source of domestic economy revenues. Nearly 10 percent of the Sri Lankan labor force works abroad, and if both diasporas are considered and family members of workers are included, as much as 20 percent of the Sri Lankan population could live abroad.

The Sri Lankan government during the escalating civil war made much use of the concepts "motherland" and "patriotism," crafted for the majority Sinhalese population as Tamil armed movements fought relentlessly for the creation of a separate state. While the physical war was fought on Sri Lankan terrain, an equally intense war of ideology was fought at the international level, legitimizing and delegitimizing the narratives of the two warring parties. It is in the latter terrain that Sri Lankan diasporas played an active role somewhat akin to "long-distance nationalism," a concept introduced by anthropologist Benedict Anderson.

Let me lay my cards on the table. I wasn't an exception to this dimension of reality. I lived a little more than a decade in Europe to pursue my doctoral studies and thereafter to work. Aravinda, upon completion of his higher studies in the UK, lived and worked in Switzerland, Hong Kong, and Singapore. We both belonged to the category of highly skilled migrants. Like Aravinda, I too belong to the majority ethnic group, Sinhalese.

Killings and bomb explosions were daily realities during the period of 1983–2009. The civil war ended in 2009 with a fierce Sri Lankan government aggressive military offensive that resulted in large number of



Aravinda. Source: Screen capture from *A Virgin Vote*.

casualties of civilians and displaced people in the war zones. Though the reasons for the conflict were largely left unaddressed, the country has experienced a relatively peaceful period since the war's end. The so-called Victor's Peace was seen being established, along with an excessive celebration of the military under a "patriotic political leadership" that "liberated the motherland from terrorists." However, in my view, nationalism by this time lost its currency to some extent. Perhaps it is because of the lack of an "enemy," the main reason to secure the motherland.

It is in this vacuum that a completely unexpected series of bomb explosions—allegedly by a local radical Muslim group with links to networks abroad—took place on Easter Sunday in 2019 in multiple locations, killing 267 people. This ignited a new phase of securitization, following a decade-long dormant security imperative. This new phase also coincided with the political campaign of a presidential candidate who was secretary of the Defense Ministry during the last phase of the war. The political campaign revived the hitherto-moribund sentiments of nationalism with a new lease on life. The candidate secured a landslide victory in November 2019 with the support of the majority Sinhala-Buddhist votes. The COVID-19 pandemic hit Sri Lanka in March 2020, when the constituency of the newly elected president was still basking in the glory of their victory that claimed

I wanted to have an extended conversation with him [Aravinda] on the very day of his first vote as a Sri Lankan citizen. I was keen to let a voice—with some extraordinary circumstances—be heard in this regard.

an ushering in of a new era of nationalism and patriotism.

The pandemic itself evoked certain elements of nationalism and patriotism. Bringing back a group of students stuck in Wuhan, China, on a Sri Lankan Airlines flight—the only international flight service in the country, run by a government-owned company—in the height of the pandemic was celebrated as a heroic nationalistic act. The need to "repatriate" migrant workers who lost their jobs or preferred to come "home" was a key preoccupation of the government.

After a gradual containment of the first wave of COVID-19 in Sri Lanka, a general election was to be held August 5, 2020. It was during our long conversation in July that Aravinda revealed to me his hope to vote in a Sri Lankan election for the first time in his life. Despite his long spells of stays abroad, Aravinda had not obtained citizenship of any other country. He had always retained Sri Lankan citizenship. This aroused a great deal of curiosity on my part, particularly in the light of the revitalized discussions of nationalism and patriotism. I understood that Aravinda is not a full-fledged representative of the broader historical narrative I have explained before. However, I wanted to have an extended conversation with him on the very day of his first vote as a Sri Lankan citizen. I was keen to let a voice—with some extraordinary circumstances—be heard in this regard. A small crew, including me, spent the entire election day with Aravinda, letting him speak his heart and mind.

asianstudies.org/conference



Join us in Honolulu, Hawaii for the **AAS 2022 Annual Conference!** Engage with Asian scholars, librarians, diplomats, and publishers from around the world with an avid interest in Asia—its culture, history, and languages.

- Panel Sessions (In-Person & Virtual)
- Book Exhibit Hall
- Annual Films Expo

Your health and safety are our priority. Please visit our website for updates on conference updates and the State of Hawai'i's travel protocol.



Association for
Asian Studies

AAS MEMBERS SAVE ON CONFERENCE REGISTRATION
REGISTRATION OPENS LATE SEPTEMBER 2021

A Brief Interview with Udan Fernando



Udan Fernando obtained his PhD from the University of Amsterdam. He currently functions as an Independent Researcher from Sri Lanka and Singapore. Until March 2020, he was Executive Director of the Center for Poverty Analysis (CEPA), a Sri Lankan think-tank. Throughout his career, as Head of the Development Commission of the National Christian Council of Sri Lanka (1989–1995), Executive Director of Paltra (gte) Ltd (1996–2001), Guest Researcher at University of Amsterdam (2002–2007), and Senior Consultant of Context International, Netherlands (2008–2012), Fernando has focused on development cooperation and aid policy in Sri Lanka, Europe, East and West Africa, and Southeast Asia. He has produced several documentaries and short films on Sri Lanka, including A Tale of Two Rebels and, most recently, A Virgin Vote.

Lucien Ellington: *Udan, thank you for making a short but illuminating documentary that is not only a contribution for those unfamiliar with Sri Lanka learning a bit more about the country, but—although brief—a film that raises universal and profound questions about patriotism, transnationalism, and nationalism—questions that might not have any “right” answers but deserve to be openly discussed in free societies.*

Aravinda, a high-skilled, transnational, educated worker, is a self-described patriot who seems proud of his roots, the time with his mother, and his love of a rediscovered native land's local history. He contrasts his patriotism with his opinion of nationalists, people he considers assume they are superior to other ethnic groups because of their racial grouping or religions. You and he both have the same ethnic and elite educational backgrounds that enable a transnational lifestyle. Please comment upon your reactions to your subject's assertions regarding patriotism and nationalism.

Udan Fernando: It's true, to some extent. There's an overlap of backgrounds of our formative years as children and teenagers in the sense we went to the same school in Sri Lanka, which is considered a prestigious educational institution in the country where we were born. And then later in life, we studied and worked abroad in different academic disciplines, as well as in different countries. The length of study and work periods abroad of the subject is considerably longer than mine. I don't think we consider these factors in a divisive sense, but to explain the stratification of Sri Lankan society. We came from different religious backgrounds—Buddhist and Christian. In Sri Lanka, religion plays a major role, depending on whether it's a majority or minority religion, in our power positions in society. Notwithstanding these common roots we share, our take on patriotism and nationalism can be nuanced. I think that's influenced by the way we interpret politics. Since my subject is very articulate and passionate on the subject, I was keen to let him tell his story, of which the content is compromised in the film only to maintain brevity and cinematic edits. As such, I would refrain from commenting.

Lucien: *One of the most interesting comments in the documentary was Aravinda's assertion that he can't walk by parliament without swearing because he thinks conditions could be better for everyone. The implication is that currently, given the existing government, voters have the potential power to effect positive change in Sri Lanka. Your comments?*

Udan: There is a general erosion of confidence on the parliament and parliamentarians. Many people, across political divides, hold a very low

opinion about the way in which eligibility for individuals to stand for elections to the parliament is obtained. People seem to be fed up with many parliamentarians with notorious and criminal backgrounds, and little or no basic educational qualifications. The current election laws have created situations where the one who spends the most for the campaign wins. The cost is borne by those with vested interests to reap benefits via the parliamentarian. A sizable number of such parliamentarians can be seen from across political parties. Some of them hold key ministerial positions. The fact that they are corrupt is widely known. The voters—at least the bulk of them—are also part of this problem, as they are dependent on the favors of politicians in a system where a politician's recommendation or approval matters in important life opportunities, ranging from school admissions to secure jobs. The opposition to this system can be seen in the cynical views held by people on parliament and parliamentarians. But realizing the possibility of transforming these widespread low opinions of the political status quo into formidable opposition that directs toward a systemic change is yet to be seen.

Lucien: *Aravinda's position reminds me of the relative secular patriotism of the pioneering social scientist Emile Durkheim; the Harvard scholar Karl Deutsch, who was involved in starting the United Nations; and the contemporary American scholar and educator E. D. Hirsch Jr. All three of these believers in liberal democracy asserted that nation-states are the most effective forms of government, given the impossibility of world government, and that the cohesion of a nation depends upon commonly shared centripetal knowledge and beliefs. Any comments on my assumption about your subject or, if I am accurate, the validity of the contentions described in this question?*

Udan: I cannot speak on behalf of my subject. Therefore, I would not try to reconcile the political thinking of the scholars you have mentioned and my subject's views. But I do recognize the usefulness of the concept of the nation-state to unpack many observations and interpretations on Sri Lankan state and society. I think the practice of the nation-state, many decades after the concept had been promoted in the world as a key unit and model of governance, has gone through a great deal of transformations, deviations, and even aberrations, with some improvisations as well. This is due to change of conditions within and in between countries, particularly with the onset of globalization. Sri Lanka is no exception to this. I think a great deal of problems we face in relation to state and society are created by the internal contradictions of the notion of nation-state and our inability to adapt.

Lucien: *Udan, thank you for the interview!*